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ABSTRACT

Many rural communities share these complaints: (1) an exodus of the best and brightest young people; (2) a changing and ambivalent self-concept about the identity and the future of the community; and (3) a scarcity of good jobs to act as the mortar that bonds the other elements together. The South Dakota Rural Schools and Community Development Program was begun for the purpose of economic development and community-building through the public schools. Based on observations and interviews with community members and school personnel, five communities in the West River region are profiled to show how the program is working: Edgemont; Belle Fourche; Buffalo; Presho; and Custer. Identified problems are similar in all of small-town and rural America, though to different degrees. The problems are: (1) administrators with an overabundance of roles; (2) higher expectations of already overworked teachers in an effort to expand curriculum offerings; (3) the centrality of professional development to school improvement; and (4) the enormous and growing gap between what schools are doing now and what they will need to be doing to meet the demands of the information age. The aim of saving rural communities through their schools runs counter to the ways in which the school establishment has operated for generations. In striving to affect both rural life and life within schools, the goal of the Rural Schools and Community Development Program may not be reached for many years, as the obstacles that face the project are formidable, growing out of the deepest structure of schooling, untouched by generations of reform. (ALL)

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# CREATING A NEW FUTURE IN WEST RIVER

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A series of case studies by teachers, principals, superintendents and an outside observer of the South Dakota Rural Schools and Community Development Projects. (1990)

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# CREATING A NEW FUTURE IN WEST RIVER

Betty Standen can see forever from her front window. To the west, past the rolling Buffalo Gap grasslands, is Wyoming. Straight south, 65 miles south in Nebraska, the distant purple of the Pine Ridge range snakes along the horizon. The Black Hills are her back yard, and her front yard falls away to the giant bowl formed over the centuries by the Cheyenne River just before it begins to wind north and east toward the Missouri.

The picture framed by her window is enthralling; the gray-violet hills in the far distance; the stillness broken only by the sigh of the ceaseless breeze of late spring and by the cry of a meadowlark breaking cover and veering out of sight; the sweet smell of new grass mingled with the pine of the foothills. Before long the freshness of the season will give way to heat and dust, but for now... For now, the enchantment that is South Dakota in springtime is unbroken.

Far below her, almost lost in the shimmering valley of the Cheyenne, is the town of Edgemont. Look closer: Main Street, Edgemont, South Dakota. Three bars, a hardware store, the weekly paper, the Chevy dealership, the bank (not owned locally), the lawyer, the park where Teddy Roosevelt spoke. Half the buildings are empty. there used to be more here: two railroad hotels, a pharmacy, a bar and hotel, a jewelry store, a lumber yard, a clothing store, a theater.

And more than that, too: a half-dozen miles outside of town, in Igloo, a federal munitions storage site once provided hundreds of jobs; in the Forties people slept in cars because there wasn't enough housing available for all the workers. And in the Fifties the uranium mining started right on the outskirts of Edgemont. But Igloo has been a ghost town for many years; herds of mule deer roam through the broken ranks of barracks. Now the Silver King mine has pulled most of its 300 employees out of Edgemont; soon it will be shut down entirely, with even the clean-up

completed. Housing isn't as hard to come by these days. A home that once would have cost $40,000 might go for as little as $12,000 today.

Edgemont is a town of boom and bust – always has been, say folks like Betty Standen, who taught English for 26 years at the high school. Her husband's family (grandfather, grandmother and aunt) home-steaded this land in the early 1900s, not too long after the railroad cut across the state. Her grandparents had farmed first in Iowa and then in Nebraska – moving west and still farther west – and heard about the promise of land in South Dakota. Iowa would have been better for farming. Wild horses kept breaking down the fences in this strange new country, so her grandpa mostly gave up the farming life and went to work for the Burlington Northern, but not before he and his relatives amassed a full section of land – 640 acres – where Betty and her husband still live.

Edgemont's not close to much; Hot Springs is 25 miles up into the Black Hills, Custer is 15 miles farther still, and Chardron, Nebraska, is 80 miles to the south. Most folks here do their shopping in Rapid City, also 80 miles away around the curve of the Hills. "This is the kind of place that you to on purpose," says Don Sondergard, who has served Edgemont as elementary principal and superintendent for just a year. Over the years the residents of this little community of about 800 have developed a strange kind of optimism about the cycles their town has passed through. Even in the bleak times, there's always a sense that another boom is just around the corner.

Sometimes it's hard to figure out where a boom is likely to come from. Edgemont has developed a questionable reputation in some parts of the state for being too hungry, for considering just about any money-making scheme that comes along. In the early Eighties, for instance, there was the plan to allow a company to use the Igloo site for the disposal of low-level nuclear wastes. The project was killed at the state level. Then there was the plan to use some of the desolate acres outside

of town for the municipal sewage ash from Minneapolis-St. Paul. The entrepreneur handling that deal went broke; a quarter of a million tons of solid waste sit outside of town, waiting for the state to take over the project. Now a firm from Colorado has purchased a couple of sections of land near town for the disposal of baled trash from Colorado - in effect, making southwestern South 'Dakota the landfill for Denver.

"Edgemont has an image problem," admits Grant Troter, owner of the hardware store downtown and the new mayor, as well. "It's regarded in the state as a place that would sell its soul to make a buck." Trotter is a native of Edgemont; he graduated from Edgemont High in 1977. He and others who have committed themselves to the survival of the little town know that a great many residents are content to wait for another big score ˜ something like the waste disposal scheme, which might possible bring the community a million dollars a year.

Without a big score, though, Trotter sees clearly that Edgemont will have to rely on its own resources if it is to make another comeback. Complacency has become a way of life for some in Edgemont, however; community pride has suffered over the decades of boom and bust. Too many Ventures have been tried and have failed: a business to repair railroad cars; a feed lot that was to become a slaughterhouse; a hog farrowing operation; a manufacturer of hydraulic couplings. The people of Edgemont have had a tough time making their plans come alive.

The Edgemont schools have had a tough time, too, even though the district is not in bad shape financially. Student enrollment has been slipping of late, and it will drop substantially as soon as Silver King shuts down entirely. Don Sondergard expects to lose 25-30 students during the next year, which will knock the enrollment down from 268 at the close of the 1988-89 school year to about 245. It's not likely that the Edgemont schools will consolidate with a neighboring district. There aren't

any districts close enough; a district like that in Oelrichs, 30 miles to the east, can exist independently with only 100 students.

But the Edgemont community is not in the habit of looking to the schools to prepare young people for the world of work. The three leading career paths that have been available to young people – railroading, ranching, and mining – require no schooling at all, though mining won't be a choice locally much longer. The Burlington Northern pays good money (up to $50,000 a year) and employs about 150 people in the area. Many young people, and their parents, don't see much reason to rely on education to get ahead. The idea of change is not terribly popular, either. "The attitude here is, 'It was good enough 20 years ago, goddamn it; just leave it alone,'" as one newcomer said.

Because the opportunities for employment are limited, most of the young people who graduate from Edgemont High aim to leave town as soon as possible after they graduate. Kerry Barker and his brother own the Victory Tavern downtown; his family owns a cement plant in town, too. Kerry counts three members of his graduating class who stuck around after school. There just isn't much to do in Edgemont to make money.

Edgemont is not alone, of course. Jobs are generally not plentiful in small-town and rural America, and a great many communities share the complaints voiced by residents of Edgemont and other towns in western South Dakota; an exodus of the best and brightest young people, the building blocks of any community; a changing and ambivalent self-concept about the identity and the future of the community – and a scarcity of good jobs to act as the mortar that bonds the other elements together. As a report form the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL) put it, "Unless these communities find ways to expand and strengthen their economic base and stem the out-migration, their future is somber."

And that's where the Rural Schools and Community Development Program – a creation of McREL, in cooperation with the Black Hills Special Services Cooperative – come ins. Community-building is the heart of the program – community-building through the public schools. That program – its aims, its strenghts, and its weaknesses – is the subject of this report.

To gather material for this document, I visited several sites in West River (South Dakotans' term for that territory west of the Missouri River, which angles in a southeasterly direction through the center of the state) that are engaged in this fledgling process of rural economic development. In all, I spent most of a week at each of three sites – Belle Fourche, Presho, and Buffalo - and split a week between the towns of Custer and Edgemont. At each site I divided my time between the schools and the community. My aim during each visit was to develop a snapshot (the time permitted me allowed no detailed portraiture) of the workings of the project at that locale. I focused, of course, primarily on those people - teachers, administrators, students, and community members - who were most closely involved with the project. I also spent a fair amount of time with the folks at the Black Hills Co-op, who are running the program for McREL.

In this report I devote more space to the communities of Edgemont and Belle Fourche than to the other three communities I visited. To me, Edgemont and Belle Fourche represent the extremes of the project as it is being worked out in practice: one run by a single person in a community with little to offer and little support for education over the years; the other well-established in the school, with a notable support system in the school district, and located in a community that is actively seeking to better its situation. Both share the weaknesses of community confusion about identity.

One final point: The five South Dakota communities and their schools resemble many other sites I visited during a year and a half of travels through small-town and rural mid-America. The schools and communities in West River are grappling with a disturbingly familiar set of problems, problems that are facing schools and communities across the Midwest, though to different degrees in different towns. The hope of the creators of this experiment in rural economic development is that this little project will help, not just these half-dozen towns, but towns all across the nation to find new ways of overcoming the stresses that are tearing apart small-town America.

Now, the aims of the Rural Schools and Community Development Program, as set forth in McREL's own description of its intent:

> Economically, the school is often the largest employer as well as the largest purchaser of goods and services in a small community.... However,... while local tax dollars have been fed into the system, the most important resource, the communities' young people, have been educated to leave town, either to continue their education or to find employment in larger urban areas. In fact, the schools' success has been measured by; how well it prepares its graduates to go away, usually never to return. [The] Rural Schools and Community Development Program's economic development projects are designed to explore ways to change that dynamic.
>
> At the same time, these projects build on rural school strengths to improve student learning. One of the strengths of small schools is that the teachers, students, administrators, and parents know one another. That personal knowledge translates into an expectation that students are responsible learners. The resulting strong relationships between students, teachers, and community are powerful agents for creating the positive school climate and high shared expectations that result in better student achievements.... For the first time, as they plan an important role in revitalizing rural communities, rural schools can lead the way for reform in urban and suburban settings.
>
> In a series of pilot sites, rural students are learning how to create jobs as part of their regular high school education. The economic development projects build on the enthusiasm of teachers and the energy and creativity of students to design ways to study local communities, discover opportunities for business ventures, and learn-by-doing how to start and run a successful small business as part of the high school experience.

EDGEMONT

In Edgemont, Paul Nelsen is the program – and the program is as yet only a feeble add-on to the everyday life of the school. Nelsen, 37, a veteran teacher in the Edgemont district after only eight years (turnover is quite high among both teachers and administrators), acknowledges that the program here is still in the building stage; he was selected to run the Rural Schools and Community Development Program "by a process of elimination." He has bought a house in town and is likely to stay, and the business teacher lives in Custer and is not as involved as Nelsen in the life of the town. The program could not be made an adjunct to the industrial arts program, as might have seemed likely, because that program has to be eliminated.

Nelsen is a native of East River; he grew up in Sioux Falls – the metropolis of the state – and took a degree in history, with a minor in physical education, all the time aiming to be a teacher and coach. He makes about $22,000 a year; his job includes acting as athletic director and coaching girls' basketball. His salary does not include running the McREL program, but he believes in the program strongly, and he sees the need for something that might act to revitalize the town where he has chosen to live.

Still, even though Nelsen has the support of his superintendent, Don Sondergard, making this project work has, so far, been an uphill march. Like Nelsen, Sondergard is a native of East River; and like Nelsen, Sondergard attended Northern State College in Aberdeen (graduating 21 years ahead of Nelsen). Sondergard serves as both elementary principal and superintendent; he is a newcomer, and he is aware that his predecessors have stayed scarcely long enough to warm the seat. The district has had new principals six years running. Five years of service in Edgemont makes one an old-timer.

Sondergard admits that the program must first crawl before it can walk, and he hopes to see the day when the school will actually will be able to start a class in entrepreneurship. "I don't want to see this idea die," he says. "Even if it doesn't keep youngsters in our community, at least it exposes them to what it takes to start a business."

Nelsen is less sanguine about the likelihood of starting a separate class in entrepreneurship. "Right now I'm the only teacher who's involved in this," he points out. "And I don't really see anybody else getting involved for a while. I told the kids it'll never happen that they'll have a person just to run this program. In fact, they're probably going to have to cut a teacher, most likely at the elementary level, after the Silver King mine finally closes."

Nelsen points to another problem with trying to add a seemingly attractive curricula idea to the well-established scheme of operation of a school system. "Some of our teachers are kind of fighting this idea," he admist awkwardly and almost painfully. "They feel that it's interfering with their structured classes. They don't want to give kids English credit, for instance, for writing things that they haven't assigned. Or our business teacher would fight the idea of turning kids loose in the middle of the day to go downtown and talk to local merchants. 'Are you kidding?' she'd say.

"It's funny how we get caught up in power struggles...," Nelsen concludes wistfully.

Teachers are not the only ones holding out against the program of rural economic development, however. Nelsen has become aware that it's difficult to awaken student interest, too. He views one of the primary goals of the program at Edgemont as "helping kids to see what all of this has to do with their lives," but shaping that connection is neither quick nor easy. He gave his seniors the option of preparing either a business plan or a plan for community service. None of the

seniors were at all interested in the plan for community service; they saw graduation (and their imminent departure from Edgemont) looming ahead, and their interest lay in making money. So they asked the kinds of questions students anywhere raise when they are exploring the minima of an assignment: "How long does it have to be?" "How much research do we have to do?"

At the heart of Nelsen's difficulty in helping the program to take root in Edgemont is the demon of time. Curricula territory in his school – as in most schools, regardless of size or setting – is well-established and jealously guarded. (Just as in so many other small schools, the fact of small scale does not mean that a business is conducted any differently than in enormous schools with huge classes. For instance, during my visit to Nelsen's psychology class, with its five students, class was conducted in the time-honored method: lecture/question/seatwork.) Any time that is to be devoted to rural economic development is stolen from time set aside for one of the fairly rigid subject-matter divisions of the core curriculum – and teachers are, most often, called to account for students' end-of-the-year knowledge of the core curriculum.

And there's more, too: the core curriculum is what teachers feel <u>comfortable</u> teaching, in their own rooms, by their own methods. Teaching as it has always been done does not involve seeking out community involvement, nor talking reluctant kids (who are also habituated to school-as-usual) into writing business plans, nor designing and administering community surveys, nor any of the other developments – many of them unique to certain sites – that have evolved as part of this McREL project.

Here is the burr that hides under the saddle of this project: the reluctance to change. This deep and intensely personal fondness for the way things are, coupled with a mostly unspoken uneasiness about the effects of change on the community

over time, form a barrier to change that is all the more potent because it is largely unstated and often even unrealized.

Jerry Chesley is fully aware of this attitude and of its effect on Edgemont. Doc Chesley is the town P.A., the surrogate physician. Trained as a registered nurse, with a degree in psychology, Chesley, a nurse practitioner, has lived in Edgemont for three and a half years and has involved himself passionately in the life of the community. In fact, Chesley was instrumental in forming the Renovation Committee for the Enhancement of Edgemont, a group dedicated to developing renewed interest in Edgemont and its appearance. He observes that few long-term residents are members of the committee; they tend to be the ones who, rather than planning and anticipating change, sit back complacently and simply react to developments as they occur.

"They want to remain the western town, in their own little hub," Chesley reflects, "but they don't realize that it takes work to stay there. It takes education. There's a lack of desire to go on, to improve not just their own town, but themselves."

Doc Chesley has suggested, for instance, that students from the school run a concession stand at the tiny city swimming pool during the summer. "Sure, it's only for three months," he points out, noting that he talked to the former mayor, the city council, the Chamber of Commerce, and the superintendent of schools, "but they can have the experience of making money and seeing what it's like. But no one, no one, has shown the slightest interest."

Now, however, Chesley is working closely with Grant Trotter, the new mayor, to change the status of the community – and the attitudes in the community. Trotter, a home-town boy, graduated from Edgemont High in 1977; he owns the local hardware store, which his father first bought when Grant was a little boy. Trotter's aim is to get people to invest their energies in the future – and the fate – of the town of Edgemont.

"Now, with the Silver King mine closing," he says almost fatalistically, with the air of one marshaling his forces for a final battle, "those who are left here will be those who want to be here. And I'm a big believer in the resources we have available. We have to concentrate on smaller businesses, ones that might create only 10-12 jobs. To a town like this that's a lot.

"The big thing we've got to do," he continues, "is to instill some pride among young people in their community – and then to create the opportunities for them. If we ever hope to keep young people here, or to get them to come back here after they leave, we've got to encourage the entrepreneurial spirit."

Trotter wants to encourage a closer relationship between the little town and its school district; like Paul Nelsen, he feels that many of the best-educated residents of Edgemont are also the more mobile ones and that the community generally does not value the work of the schools to any great degree. He sees the economic development project as an ideal way to increase student incentives for learning and community pride in one package.

The mayor's goal: tourism that would transform Edgemont into the Southern Gateway to the Black Hills. So what if Edgemont, where geothermal activity causes warm water to flow from the cold-water spigots, is close to nothing. In this part of the country, nothing is especially close to anything else. What's needed first, though, is community pride. And Trotter figures that pride in the potential of the community might as well start with the kids.

Right now, however, that pride is mostly potential. The project has accomplished a few little things so far. A couple of junior boys, who accompanied Nelsen to tone of the organizational meetings sponsored by McREL and the Black Hills Co-op, started a business that charges clients $30 to videotape homes and their contents for insurance purposes. A local businessman is urging the boys to expand their business – to make tapes of pastureland and homes for prospective buyers, for

example. But the students also work after school as stock boys at the local Jack 'n' Jill; with their part-time jobs and school, they don't feel they have time for much else.

The students put together a second community survey that they hoped would reveal the needs of residents, (but the survey was "done too much in haste," Nelsen admits, and received only a 30% return.) Another survey compiled by the students in the program showed that nearly 70 businesses have closed in Edgemont since 1980; 14 have opened.

Meanwhile, as Betty Standen observes after a quarter-century of teaching Edgemont youngsters, "not very many kids stay around – maybe a couple in each class. Their goal is mostly just to get up and get out of here and go on. And yet...and yet so many – like our own kids [eight of them, seven of whom left home] – would love to come back here if there were something for them to do."

**BELLE FOURCHE**

Clear on the other side of the Black Hills – a hundred miles due north of Edgemont – lies Belle Fourche: "Beautiful Fork," where the Redwater and the Belle Fourche Rivers marry. (Many miles on to the east, the Belle Fourche pours into the Cheyenne, which has would its way north on its journey to the Missouri.)

To look at Belle Fourche – "Belle" to the locals – is to see revealed the remnants of a way of life. See it as the first settlers saw it: a sheltered spot after countless days of wind-swept travel from the big river weeks to the east. North and west of Belle the land rises once again, leveling out just across the river to a breath-taking desolation of unforgiving high prairie and gumbo mud and sparse antelope grass – Castle Rock Butte stabs into plain sight 30 miles to the north and east – that ignores state boundaries as it sweeps unchecked west to the Rockies and northward toward Canada.

This was the West of cowboys and the Deadwood gold strike, hunting ground of the Lakota Sioux. Even without the tourist museums and historical markers, that past breathes still among these buttes and wind-carved canyons and yawningly empty spaces. And yet that past is dying a hard, slow death right here – and the identity of Belle Fourche is nared in the death throes.

Belle seems far more fortunate than Edgemont. The town of 4,500 sits on the more prosperous side of the Hills; just a dozen miles to the south is the relatively progressive college town of Spearfish, site of Black Hills State. State Route 85 arrows through Belle on its way down from North Dakota to meet I-90 at Spearfish.

Belle Fourche has so much that Edgemont would like to have. It's a county seat, even though it's wedged into the southwest corner of Butte County, by virtue of the fact that there are simply no other towns of any size in the entire county. Sheep and ranching play a large part in the local economy, as does the one major industry: the bentonite mines to the west of town, which draw the many trains that cross Main Street every day. There's life here. There's money, too (attested to the unusually large number of lawyers – some two dozen – who hang their shingles in town).

Yet the two towns have more in common than might seem to be the case at first. Here, too, is a community with its own image problem – a problem reflected in the attitudes of its young people toward the idea of staying here to build their lives after their schooling has ended. Here, too, is fertile ground for an attempt at economic development.

"When I was in high school, my economic teacher said that if you ever want to amount to anything, you'll have to get out to South Dakota," recalls Nancy Pummel Cole, the stylish owner of Traditions, a clothing store in Belle Fourche. Cole, who grew up in Spearfish, adds, "I see kids here in Belle with that same attitude today. A lot to those kids, though - if the opportunities were here for them – would stay."

But Cole sees Belle Fourche taking a back seat to Spearfish, Sturgis, and even Rapid City, all perched on I-90 and within a fairly easy drive to Belle. ("A lot of folks automatically think of going to the mall in Rapid to shop," she notes.) The only movie theatre in Belle closed maybe twenty years ago, and the hospital is struggling. "We have just begged for doctors here," Cole laments. So while you're in Rapid City to visit the specialist, you also buy shoes for the kids because there's no shoe store in Belle, and you pick up the groceries cheaper than you can get them in Belle – "and it's the domino effect," says Cole. "It's dangerous. It saps the vitality of a small town."

Kathy Wainman, executive director of the Chamber of Commerce and a resident of Belle for four years, understands well the divisions within the community she has made her home. She identifies three groups in town: the folks who see Belle Fourche as a cow town, and who want to keep it that way; those who believe that Belle is withering away, and are content to mourn its passing without trying especially hard to save it; and those residents who feel that Belle Fourche must grow or it will slide backward and eventually die. ("No matter how they feel about the issue, they feel strongly," Wainman testifies.) Faced as she is with the task of sorting out what the community wishes for itself, she is confused – and a strong supporter of a program that has as one of its goals the changing of young people's attitudes about their hometown.

What is Belle Fourche to become, Wainman asks herself continually. "I don't especially want to be compared to Spearfish because we're not that kind of town – and I don't especially want us to be that kind of town," she muses. "We're not ever going to be a college town or an interstate community."

She's also troubled by the possible effects of growth, if growth is in the cards for Belle Fourche. "We're spending all our time trying to get new business here – but I liked Belle originally because it's a small town. Personally, I'm not sure how far

forward I want us to grow. I don't want Belle Fourche to become a city; I know I don't."

Even though many residents of Belle Fourche look outward toward larger cities for a role model – and are disenchanted with the cow-town image that Belle retains (witness the logo on some of the town's promotional literature, complete with cowboy on bronco) – the well-being of the area remains closely tied to the land. After all, this is a place where, until three years ago, rodeo was still an extra curricula event. "When ranching doesn't do well, the downtown doesn't do well," says Graydon Dailey, a native of East River and one-time construction foreman who teaches industrial arts at the high school.

Dailey has observed a substantial change in the ranching economy during the nine years since he moved west of the Missouri. "Now some of the ranch kids live in town, and they know nothing about ranching. They don't want to know – it's just a place to eat and sleep to them. It's all changed so fast. People have been discouraged by the ag crisis; they don't want their kinds in agriculture of any kind. There was an era of easy money and easy borrowing that sucked a lot of these people in. Many of them have been on the ranch for a hundred years, and now it's all changing around them."

Though the bentonite mines are a major and continued source of low-scale employment for the town, no one is sure how long they will continue to be a part of the local economic picture. Slade Ross, a shrewdly observant junior at Belle Fourche High School, says, "Belle Fourche is like the old mining towns. It's a lot like Lead-Deadwood and the gold mines; when the gold is gone, the company will be gone." Other people besides Slade wonder what Belle's future will be when the bentonite runs out.

If a program of rural economic development is going to work anywhere, though, it should work in Belle Fourche. So many of the elements that might be considered necessary for success are present; in this respect, Belle Fourche and Edgemont could hardly be more unalike. At Belle Fourche High School, the project has its own niche in the curriculum, with three teachers who have worked together to plan the program, and it has a principal who is a true believer in the goals of the program. Moreover, since the spring of 1989, the school district has hired a new superintendent, Jim Doolittle, who formerly supervised this very project for the Black Hills Co-op, and a new social studies teacher, Curt Shaw, who directed the project up in Harding County. In Belle Fourche, everything is in place for success.

Jean Helmer and Mike Pangburn are the teachers who share most of the load for the Rural Schools and Community Development Program in Belle Fourche; both teach English and language arts, as does Linda Rothermel (along with French), who also takes a hand in the project. All three are native South Dakotans (Helmer grew up in Belle Fourche) who attended college in-state (Helmer and Pangburn at Black Hills State; Rothermel at "the U" in Vermillion, at the very southeastern tip of the state), all three of them work with the Research & Development class, which is the hub of the project at Belle Fourche High.

"For me, the heart of the program is finding new ways of delivering traditional skills to students," says Pangburn – "Pang" to most of his students. (Helmer is known to students as "Ham," short for "Hammer," for her no-nonsense approach to discipline.) Helmer vigorously rejects what she calls "passive education:" "Duh, here's my brain. Fill it up. I'll pick it up in four years." Instead, she maintains, "people learn best from their peers; they learn best when they're actively involved. And the entrepreneurial approach is where it all comes together."

Of the 22 students who are involved with the economic development program at Belle Fourche High School, Pangburn notes, some eight to ten are "totally committed" to what the teachers are trying to do; three or four students are not committed at all. An inherent danger in the project, he adds, is that "it may begin to seem to students that the only important thing is how to make a buck." Both Pangburn and Helmer reject that notion; they see the instilling of a sense of ethics as vital to success, and they differ somewhat from Paul Dingeman, the principal, in the importance of making money to the aims of the project.

"With me, showing the kids how to make money is a by-product," says Pangburn. Helmer agrees: "The ultimate goal is providing a sound education." And she goes on: "I used to think that I simply taught English, but I don't now. I teach an approach to life. This is how to survive living when you get there. Kids would leave here with all sorts of knowledge but with no practical skills. Now I tell them, 'This is not my business. It's your decision to make.'"

And a business it certainly is at this school – more than a simple business, it's becoming a mini-conglomerate. The spark came from McREL and the black Hills Co-op; the extra push that got things going in Belle came from Paul Dingeman. In the fall of 1987 Dingeman attended a McREL conference and became keen on the idea, with one difference.

"I suggested that we make it a curricula approach rather than an extracurricular approach at our school," he recalls. "A lot of those other schools are adding it on. I'm afraid that approach might lead to a program being a flash in the pan." And he continues, with enthusiasm, describing a slice of his vision of what the program might eventually become: "If you're going to ask a kid to give an impromptu speech, why not have him speak to try to sell a pair of shoes to the class? Why not integrate the program right into the curriculum?"

Dingeman, after considering various faculty members, suggested to Pangburn and Helmer that they run the project. "Paul's words were: 'Let's have a class,'" Pangburn recalls. "We were supposed to come up with what could be done at our school; we were on a trimester system and so were more flexible than a lot of schools. I presented our ideas – thinking that it was a hypothetical plan – and discovered that it was to be our program!"

"So Mike came back to me and said, 'Next semester we're going to team-teach a new class,'" Helmer continues. "That was the beginning of the Research & Development class." Actually, the R&D class was the offspring of several previous classes; the school had offered classes in historiography, building trades (taught by Graydon Dailey), and advanced creative writing. This last offering, which has been in place the longest, involved students in publishing their own work. The teachers put all these elements together for the R&D class, the core of the entire program.

The R&D class is divided into three groups that run the project at the school; students rotate through each group in six-week cycles, thus allowing every student experience with all facets of the business during each semester. The groups are: the radio show (a 10-minute spot on the local station two days a week, providing school news to the community); business and finance, which manages the affairs of the entire project; and long-range business planning and community analysis.

Students are required to put in a minimum of seven hours each week: five hours in the R&D class; the other two hours or more (comp time is provided in lieu of overtime pay) working in the school store, surveying community attitudes, working on publications, or other class-approved activities.

There's more to the program at Belle Fourche High, however. There's THIS, Ltd. It's THIS, Ltd., that is the budding mini-conglomerate. EAT THIS, for instance, is the school snack bar, built and staffed by the students in the program. The concept behind EAT THIS is to eventually create something that is a

combination of student center, lounge, and hangout. ("I could envision the group running this as being something like a Student Union Board in college," Helmer says.)

Other offshoots of the THIS, Ltd., concept – some of which are still in the planning stage – are WEAR THIS (a T-shirt manufacturing business) and PUBLISH THIS (a book-publishing business, which would publish collections of creative writing produced by the journalism class). Rothermel hopes to publish a literary magazine three times a year that would solicit contributions from the entire district.

An important piece of the THIS, Ltd., puzzle is the fact that the corporation is really meant to function as a corporation, with the students as shareholders. Graduating seniors are supposed to sell their shares back to the corporation at par value (currently zero) on their way out the door. "One of the things that we thought would happen – and it really has happened," reports Pangburn, "is that some of the kids would actually become entrepreneurs, would rise to the top – and some would have no desire to be managers but would prove to be awfully good workers.

"I think a lot of the kids have identified those of their peers who are the leaders," he continues. "Consequently, the whole group need not come together every time a decision must be made. The officers would be elected at the annual meeting and would run the corporation."

The students' expectations of grand successes in the business world, however, have created some difficulties for the fledgling corporation. "There's a feeling that by now we were supposed to be rolling in dough," Pangburn says wryly. "And I must say that they've certainly done a good job of learning from their failures. We had thought that they wouldn't steal from themselves. But I think the corporation has taken on an identity of its own, and somehow it doesn't feel like you're working for yourself any more. It's working for 'The Business.'" The larcenies are mostly petty –

a candy bar here and a Coke there – but the introduction of a stricter check-out system increased the average take by between $30 and $40 per week.

The corporation has roughly $600 in a checking account, which would be profit, except that the business floated an initial loan of $1,000 from the school district, which has yet to be repaid. Working into the black has proven to be slow work.

Pangburn has noticed an unexpected correlation among this student workers. "There are maybe 10 to 12 of the 22 who feel some sense of real ownership. But the greatest number of students who have some sense of commitment to the business come from families who are in business themselves, rather than from families who are wage-earners. Maybe we can do those other kids a favor by providing a program that allows them to view close-up what it's like to be in business for yourself."

A major difficulty facing the program in Belle Fourche is the task of involving more people – faculty, students, and community members – in the enterprise. "I'm more than ever convinced that this is important," says Pangburn, "but I haven't yet figured out how to give this experience to more than 20-25 kids at a time. In fact, I don't really think the number of students in the class should grow, but the number of shareholders might grow, especially if the corporation becomes lucrative enough so that the shareholders make a profit.

"We have to figure out a way to get other faculty involved," he continues. "I hope that we'll eventually get enough faculty members involved that Jeannie and I can become facilitators. One of the business teachers has told me she'd be glad to do a unit on computers. I'd like to see a commitment by the whole district to get involved in this business. As it is, there's hardly a period of the day that someone doesn't come to me with some small crisis involved in the corporation – maybe 15-20% of my day. That wears on me."

That kind of commitment may be easier to come by with Jim Doolittle in the superintendent's seat. It was commonly known that the previous superintendent was no fan of Paul Dingeman, the high school principal, and common knowledge, too, that the school boar was about evenly divided on the merits of the programs. And in the background, as Graydon Dailey observed, is South Dakotans' resistance to change. "They're very wary of anybody new comin' in with new ideas."

Even without support from above, though, Dingeman backed the economic development program to the hilt. A native of Deadwood, a Korean veteran, and a Fifties graduate of Black Hills State, Paul Dingeman is known to be a zealot about this program, as well as a visionary who is scrupulously loyal to both his superiors and his subordinates. Less widely known is the fact that Dingeman has lived the program; as a young man, he did all the things he wishes for his student. He has run businesses, started them from nothing – learning, among other things, how to recap tires, fly airplanes, run a supper club, and start a creamery. He has learned how to make it, he feels, and it is important to him to pass along that knowledge.

Dingeman is fully aware of the disruption that such a program can cause in the routinized life of a high school. "It's been a real adjustment for the rest of the faculty to have these kids running all over the building," he notes. "But if this program is to succeed, Room 224 cannot be the classroom; the community must be the classroom. And when someone has to run down to the radio station to get a tape, well, there's nothing wrong with that."

Of real concern, too, is the fit of this idea with the rest of the curriculum. "You don't just come in and tell everybody that everything we've been doing is all wrong, and that we're going to change it," he says with a smile. Dingeman has made available to teacher that scarcest and thus most valuable for commodities in the life of a school: time. Released time for teachers and the space to try out new ideas.

Although McREL has not dumped much money into this project, Dingeman's gift has enabled some change to take place.

And there's yet another concern: Dingeman is aware that his lead teachers may soon become burned out with the program. "Others will eventually have to take up part of the load," he foresees. "But first we must work out the bugs. Once others see it can be done, they'll fall into place. I don't think we've yet identified all the skills that are necessary for a young person to succeed as a private entrepreneur. But when the program has stood the test of time, I think other schools will pick it up."

Dingeman points to a characteristic of the residents of Belle Fourche that he feels has led to the acceptance of this innovative program in a locale not known for its embrace of change. "The city's really high on our program. They tell me that it's about time. Why? You have to remember that this is a Republican, NRA, super-conservative, government-get-off-our-back area. So they're highly in favor of an entrepreneurial program that doesn't look for federal funding and yet promises to create jobs."

Dingeman confirms the contradictions ("It's a community full of them") that reside at the heart of Belle Fourche and that have led to its difficulty in moving into the modern ear. "They're proud of being a cow town," he says, "but they're also embarrassed by that image at other times."

And down the road for the program? Dingeman believes that the little cadre of business-builders will know within three to four years if they have succeeded in their aims. One of the ultimate goals of the program at Belle Fourche High School is the elimination of the R&D class, moving all the elements of the program out into the regular curriculum and integrating them completely into the life of the school. Another of his pre-eminent goals is to use the program to improve writing skills and thinking skills among the students.

Beyond this particular project, however, Paul Dingeman has larger concerns about what made such an idea a necessary, valuable, and timely addition to this school in the first place. "The thing that concerns me," he says heatedly, "is that children start out excited by school. By the time they get to us they're zombies. I don't think it's the fault of the teachers as much as it is of the structure. So many schools are locked into meeting state requirements, and are slaves to the 50-minute period, that it's very difficult for administrators to break out of that mold.

"So we punish Johnny because he won't line up, and we change him from a risk-taker and an innovator to a robot. And the teacher ends up married to the textbook and the four walls of the classroom and not getting sued and all that stuff. And somewhere along the way they lose their spark – and so do their students.

"It's important to me that teachers know they can take chances and still have my support. That's a major, major concern of mine. And I wonder, 'Why didn't we do this before?' Kids relate to it. You can see the sparkle come back into their eyes."

**BUFFALO**

If Belle Fourche feels itself isolated, then Buffalo, county seat of Harding County, 70 miles north of Belle, is surely the next stop before the end of the world. From the one town to the other stretches magnificent emptiness: sagebrush, buttes, gumbo mud, cattle, sheep, antelope, and missile silos.

This is high-desert Ranchland. Down in Belle Fourche, where the thousands upon thousands of tilled acres are either "above the ditch" (unirrigated) or "below the ditch" (irrigated), farming has been made, over the years, to seem a part of the ecosystem. Up here, dry-land farming seems, as Jim Doolittle puts it, "like imposing your will on Nature in an unnatural way."

Doolittle knows. A native of this short-grass country, he runs cattle on 20,000 acres east of Buffalo, in addition to running the Rural Schools and Community development Program for the Black Hills Co-op (and now running the Belle Fourche schools). But his ranch – even though it's the size of whole townships back east – is not an especially large one, he points out; his neighbor's spread is about 80,000 acres, with some 2,500 head of cattle.

A person can go a long way between neighbors in Harding County, with its 1,300 residents and 2,500 square miles. Here there are more pickup trucks registered than cars. Even though as many as a thousand cars a day pass through town on Route 85 during the tourist season, few visitors stop in Buffalo (470 people); a truck bearing a license plate beginning with something other than Harding County's "35" is viewed with some suspicion.

Here, as elsewhere in the state, the original homesteads were the 160-acre tracts first staked out, with while man's logic, by droves of government surveyors who precisely parceled the millions of unsettled acres into townships six miles square, each township neatly divided into 36 sections measuring one square mile and then subdivided into quarters – tidily ready for cataloging and sale. Unfortunately,the rules failed to fit the land. A quarter-section could feed a family in Indiana; in South Dakota, as one local said, "a quarter couldn't keep a dog alive."

So, in the first years of this century, whole families – fathers and mothers and uncles and brothers – would homestead the new land, each member of the family claiming a contiguous quarter-section and together claiming a section or more. Over the years, as the unforgiving climate and the unyielding land forced out the meek, the average size of the spreads grew and grew. Many settlers gave up their new land in 1911, when the corn never came up; many more left in the summer of '36, when drought and the Depression laid waste to countless farms.

"When a homesteader pulled out, you bought his land," says Marge Catron, who lives out beyond Buffalo, within hailing distance of the Montana border. "And then you always call it 'Carl Olson's land' or 'Jenny Overson's land.'" With the exception of her parents' original 640-acre tract, Catron's six thousand acres were patched together over decades from homesteaders' "160's."

As the size of the ranches grew, the number of people in Harding County dwindled – and so did the need for schools. Once there were as many as 60 little schoolhouses sprinkled across the county's 2,500 square miles; today there are eight. Eight elementary schools – one with only six children K-6 – and the one middle school/high school in Buffalo, square in the center of Harding County. Some teachers in Harding County may see their principal once every month. Isolation.

And yet, over the decades, isolation has bred pride. Those people who remain are survivors; they are intensely proud of living on this wind-swept rangeland and resent any thought that they might be deprived of the benefits that accrue to more densely populated areas. The name of the local paper, The Nation's Center News, hints of their feelings toward this land; its name suggests more than the simple fact that Buffalo is near the geographical center of the U.S. Folks who live in Harding County feel sorry for folks who do not live here.

But still the young people are leaving. Some do return; a good many ranchers here have college degrees. The locals are fond of saying that the young folks who leave the county find out "the good things we have to offer, and maybe they see we don't have it so bad back here."

Curt Shaw, while he was running the economic development program at the high school, hoped to spread the word that Harding County is a good place to live. Shaw, like Paul Nelsen in Edgemont, has been the entire program in Buffalo. And, just as at Edgemont, the program at Harding County High School is an add-on to the curriculum. At least in Buffalo, though, the project has its own course.

Shaw teaches history, government, eight-grade social studies, civics – and rural economics; he also acts as athletic director, as head football and basketball coach, and as assistant track coach. And he tries to squeeze a little more time for rural economics out of the other hours in his day. He earns $15,300 per year for his teaching; the additional jobs bring his salary to $20,000. He earns nothing extra for running the McREL project.

Shaw is a native of West River. He graduated from Belle Fourche High School in 1967 and from Black Hills State in 1985, after eight years of the Army and of trying assorted colleges in California brought him home once again. Shaw fits well in Buffalo, as does his battered '68 Dodge pickup with its 171,000 miles; owner and truck are both well-traveled veterans.

Shaw's involvement in the project came when Jim Doolittle approached Chuck Maxon, a long-time friend and the superintendent of the Harding County schools. Doolittle wished to involve a district outside the black Hills Co-op service area (Harding County belongs to South Dakota's Northwest Area Special Service Co-op).

Maxon attended one meeting and became "gung-ho" about the idea. "The concept is a natural for these small communities," he says. "Every one of these communities has a dying Main Street. In fact, it may not look like it, but Buffalo is one fo the most viable communities in this whole area. Like Presho, there's a lot of money here that isn't visible."

Shaw was less enthusiastic at first. Even after he attended the first workshop sponsored jointly by McREL and the Black Hills Co-op, he came away shaking his head and thinking, as he recalls, "What am I gonna do?" His initial impression was that the program was soundly based in theory but worth little in practice.

But Shaw turned his young entrepreneurs loose on two projects in the fall of 1988, and the projects – a community survey and a directory of businesses in Harding County – opened their eyes to the possibilities of entrepreneurship in their

hometown. "Those kids looked down Main Street and saw maybe four or five businesses," Shaw recalls. "It turned out that there were close to 80 businesses – folks out in the country, cottage industries, old Johnny's upholstery shop, insurance agents; some of them get all their business by word of mouth."

Fourteen young people, from 10th through 12th grade, have enrolled in Shaw's Rural Economics class. Shaw is planning to renegotiate the class contract, however after bitter experience has taught its lesson. Everyone is supposed to share equally in the profits, but, as it turns out, not everyone is doing equal shares of the work. "You have kids who set back and wait for something to happen," Shaw observes. "They'll do what you tell 'em to do. I want them to start to do things without my telling them."

Generally, though, the students enjoy the program because it's something different, and also because of the publicity that their maiden project has received around the state. "How would you like to be a sophomore," Shaw says, "and get your picture in four different newspapers with the governor?"

Banks are the project that put Harding County High School and its young entrepreneurs on the map – banks in the shape of the state, bearing the legend, "You Can Bank on South Dakota." Shaw enlisted the aid of a crony in the community to cut out the banks (other shapes, such as footballs, are also available); the students are responsible for staining, assembling, and marketing them.

"Now we have something else besides athletics as a focus for community pride," Shaw says. "We have banks." And indeed Shaw has observed a change in the community's attitude toward the rural economic development program as a result of the bank project's initial success. After members of the class attended a meeting of the Chamber of Commerce, Shaw said the general reaction was: "Hey, they've got a lucrative business. This is gonna get off the ground!"

The idea was conceived at the end of January, 1989. A contingent of students presented the first bank to Gov. George Mickelson at a press conference on February 16. The class charges $15 per bank, plus postage and handling. A mailing to 133 banks and branches all over the state brought in dozens of orders.

The Rural Economics group has come up with other ideas, too – some an undertaking of the entire class, some the effort of a few individuals. The idea of Casino Night, for example (which was borrowed from the program in Lyman County), was a break-even proposition carried out by the whole class. Casino Night was meant to give students an alternative to drinking and partying after the Prom. It was an unqualified success; most students stayed till the doors closed. And it rallied intense community support for the project.

Other student-run businesses are smaller and more seasonal. Several students in the class started a firewood company, which has enjoyed modest initial success, even though the first winter of its existence was unexpectedly mild.

The true test of the program's staying power in Buffalo comes as it enters its second year. The acknowledged student leaders of the class – Ben Latham, Lyle Bowers, Tracy Moseley – have graduated, and Shaw has moved to Belle Fourche. Will the program fade away, with a rookie teacher running it? Curt Shaw thinks not; he believes the remaining students and the community will continue to support the idea.

Shery Negaard, a one-time classmate of Jim Doolittle and owner, with her husband, of a hardware store and lumber yard in Buffalo (and a member of the project's advisory board), is guardedly optimistic about the continued success of the economic development project. She hopes that community support will continue, but she is aware that much of the success of the project rests on the teacher who is directing it.

Superintendent Chuck Maxon admits that the prospect of filling Curt Shaw's position has troubled him. Should he hire someone new to handle only the teaching part of Shaw's load, and consider someone else as athletic director? Should he ask one of the teachers already on staff to take over the economic development project? "All of our teachers are already so damned busy; they're just shittin' and gittin' all the time," he says grimly. "They've all got five classes, and most of 'em have five preparations, too." (As it turned out, Maxon hired a new teacher to take over the social studies teaching load and the McREL project, even though he had originally expected to pass the project on to someone on staff.)

Can the project succeed in conservative Harding County? At the heart of its prospects for success are the attitudes of the community toward change of any kind. Change comes hard around here. Those who have survived the rigors of the unrelenting prairie are likely to believe that what has been should continue to be. As Jim Clarkson, owner of the local steak house, says, "A lot of people here like things pretty much the way they are." Changing that attitude may be one of the biggest challenges facing the young people of Harding County, if they truly wish to make this beautiful desolation their home – and their workplace.

**PRESHO**

Son of a band instructor himself, Ron Stoneback is Mr. Band in Lyman County. Mornings he spends at the middle school in Kennebec, the county seat, nine miles east of Presho. Afternoons he spends at the high school right in Presho. Evenings he gives private lessons to every student enrolled in the music program in the county: about 90 kids in all. He earns $20,000 per year. Running the Rural Schools and Community Development Program in the Lyman County schools earns him nothing; for him, it's a calling.

Presho is three hundred miles southeast of Buffalo, about two hundred miles straight east of Rapid City, just off I-90. A half-hour on east of Presho, the now-mighty Missouri River forms the eastern boundary of Lyman County – and the end of that part of South Dakota known to the natives as West River.

Lyman County is predominantly farmland rather than ranchland, and there's a lot of money salted away behind the town's unpretentious facade. Lyman is known to be among the leaders in the state in per-capita income. Many farmers here-abouts were turned into "mailbox farmers" by the Conservation Reserve Program. The Farm Act of 1985 has been good to Lyman County: 40 couples took trips to Las Vegas last winter, and two families traveled to Australia.

The Community of Presho sprang up with the railroad shortly after the turn of the century, its population booming for a few years and then falling back to a level that remained fairly steady for decades, before beginning to decline in recent years. (Some railroad towns were not so fortunate: a half-hour south of Presho lies Carter, which once was home to 2,000 people and now claims only seven.)

Created by the railroad, Presho prospered while the railroad was king. Once the town was the second-largest hay-bailing and shipping point in the nation, and once it served as a major shipping point for cattle drives. Several families descended from the original settlers of those days still live in Presho; a great deal of the land in the area is passed down from generation to generation. Now, however, as in so many other farming communities,the size of the farms has grown over the past couple of generations; in fact, the number of farms has been cut in half, says Bob Cameron, owner of the local paper. (Cameron moved to Presho in 1954 and says that he is still considered an outsider.)

But many long-time local residents agree – to the point that it seems almost a local legend – that "anybody who's willing to work and to innovate a little can make a living here in Presho," as Charlie Beckwith, retired owner of a shoe repair shop,

says Laurel Houchin, who has lived in Kennebec all his life, agrees. "I've never known anybody to starve to death in this community if they wanted to work," he observes. "The ones that leave here leave by choice."

There's a catch, however, as Houchin readily admits: "We probably don't have as many jobs here because we don't have as many businesses as we used to. And let's face it: our jobs here aren't high-paying jobs. We're not in the high-rent district out here."

Consequently, a large number of young people leave Presho, at least at first. Many of them go away to college, though a fair number of them come back later, even if it means taking low-paying jobs. But Lyman County is home; young people would settle here, as their parents and their parents' did, if the future seemed sufficiently bright.

The future in Lyman County seems tenuous, though – at least the future of the school system does. Enrollments have declined gradually but steadily, by 60 students K-12 over the past nine years in this district that spreads fewer than 400 students over 1,600 square miles. As Laurel Houchin puts it, "Seems like every time a baby's born, a couple of people leave town." The enrollment declines have forced drastic cuts in the budget, down now to $1.8 million per year from a high of $3 million. The cuts have resulted in the elimination of all teacher aides, some of the bus routes, and any additional pay for club sponsorships. "There's very little fat left to cut," says Ivan Dixon, principal of the 109-student high school.

So, just as in Edgemont, the economic development program in Presho comes out of the hide of the teacher who runs it. In Ron Stoneback's case, that means running the class out of his office in the band room, stealing a few minutes here and a piece of a period there from an already packed scheduled.

Stoneback characterizes himself as "a mover and a shaker" in this little community. A professional musician who once sang on the Lawrence Welk show, he grew up in East River near Brookings, site of South Dakota State University, which he attended. A devout man, he once served as lay pastor and choir and youth group director for a Lutheran church in Sioux Falls. He has written commercials and produced music videos. He puts all of this experience to good use in his job in Lyman County.

"My father always said that if music in a small community can do nothing else, it should draw the community together," says Stoneback, who came to Presho in the fall of 1987. When he arrived, the band was effectively dead. Stoneback immediately told the band members he planned to take them on a tour the following spring. He faced the task of raising the money for the trip, as well as cultivating the group's ability to handle such a big step. So Stoneback and his band raised $1,000 by selling chances on a television set, all the while he was working to improve them musically. By June they were ready, and the band program in Lyman County has never looked back.

"The kids began enjoying band, and they were really enjoying the business part of it, too," recalls Stoneback," so I suggested that we make the bank into a company." Their next step was to raise $3,200 by hosting a dinner/musical evening for the entire community. Stoneback's goal behind all of this activity was to use the schools to unite all four communities in Lyman County (which had suffered as a result of consolidation): "our part in healing the old wounds," as Stoneback says. "I wanted to give everyone a reason to say, 'Lyman is my community,'" he notes.

At just about that same time, Chris Anderson, Lyman County superintendent of schools for nine years, began talking to Jim Doolittle about the rural economic development program. Anderson, a highly visible person in South Dakota politics, grew up in Murdo, another I-90 town, just a half-hour west of Presho.

An alumnus of Black Hills State, like so many other educators in West River, he and Doolittle came up together as part of the tightly knit community of school people in the western reaches of the state.

"Ron [Stoneback] and I realized that everything the kids were learning in his program fit right in with what McREL and the Black Hills Co-op were advocating," Anderson says. But Anderson's political ties enabled the Lyman County schools to go a bit further.

Anderson and Doolittle met with former U.S. Sen. Jim Abdnor, a Kennebec native and long-time friend who happened, at the time, to be director of the Small Business Administration. "We wanted job creation, not job extensions," Anderson recalls. "We wanted to be able to help create new jobs that didn't already exist int he community." So FASTRACK was born, and piloted in the state of South Dakota. Not coincidentally, the first FASTRACK loan was awarded to Aaron Ambur, a student at Lyman County High School.

Eighty percent of every $2,000 loan under the FASTRACK program comes from a state fund established to create and nurture new businesses started by high school students. A unique feature of FASTRACK – and a means of helping student businesses to take root in their home communities – is that 10% of the loan must come from a local lending institution, and another 10% must come from some local source besides the bank. Gov. Mickelson put up $30,000 for the FASTRACK program; another $30,000 in matching funds came from private sources.

While Doolittle and Anderson were making their arrangements at the state level, Stoneback was whipping his band into a money-making frenzy. One idea was allowing the student body to run the concession operations at school functions; money raised by this activity, which Stoneback readily admits is not unique to Lyman, goes into a fund for the junior class. There were other fund-raising ideas

too: delivering flowers for Mother's Day, a Sunday Night Evening of Fine Dining and selling Lyman Raiders sweatshirts.

Behind these money-making schemes was a larger plan, however; "the creation of a climate that was favorable to individual initiative," as Stoneback says. And along the path to the creation of such a climate, Stoneback worked with the students to design and distribute a survey of community needs to 500 local residents. Part of the survey was demographic information; part of it polled residents about their interest in any one of the following services: grocery delivery, pet care, salt delivery, garbage pickup, house cleaning, or hair styling.

"All of this is a way to show local people that we don't just have our hands out for money," says Stoneback. "We're interested in providing services that they would have needed anyway.

Steve Hayes, loan officer at the Draper State Bank in Presho – privately owned, independent bank founded in the 1920's by his grandfather – applauds the ideas for new businesses that have sprung from the economic development program. "For years we taught our children to get a degree and to leave the community to find a job," he says. "And the community suffered as a result. Now we're trying to reverse that way of thinking among our young people." Hayes, who is a member of the advisory board to the project in Lyman County, wishes that other teachers in the district would become involved in the program; he recognizes that at present only Stoneback and Chris Anderson are taking part.

But there has been some criticism of the program among other teachers in the school district, and criticism from teachers in other communities, too. Some of these teachers feel that Anderson has played fast and loose with the demands of the curriculum.

Anderson scoffs good-naturedly at his detractors. "Here's the way school should work," he says, using a young man named Tyler Marken as an illustration. Tyler has been spending the semester developing a prospectus for a garbage hauling business. (Another student, Mike Fasthorse, is spending two periods each day investigating the feasibility of a water-softening/salt delivery service.) "We give Tyler English credit because he has to write his own business plan; government credit because he has to work with city and county governments in developing his business; math credit and accounting credit for the bookkeeping that is necessary; and business law credit for the legal work involved.

"At the end of all of this, Tyler has the option not to go into business. But [and this interview was held on March 1, 1989] I anticipate he'll be picking up garbage by the end of May. If he decides not to go through with the business, we reserve the right to turn it over to someone else.

"We do a tremendous amount of fund-raising in this school district every year – but every school district does," Anderson continues. "I say back off and let the kids handle it all. Instead of having directions handed down from adults, let the kids do it. We've found that kids are much more enthusiastic and innovative than we've ever given them credit for being."

There's one more piece of the rural economic development program at Lyman that has flourished especially because of the presence in Presho of Ron Stoneback: "The Lyman Connection" – a weekly video produced by Stoneback and his band class and aired on the area TV station. "The Lyman Connection" highlights activities of interest in the county schools and features student-produced commercials (occasionally tremendously entertaining) for local businesses.

Could this feature of the program in Lyman County possibly survive without someone as multi-talented as Ron Stoneback? The Lyman County schools will be forced to discover the answer to that question because, by the time this report is

written, Stoneback will have left to return to graduate school. His students believe that 80% of the success of the program depends on him. They have little confidence that the program can survive without him.

And yet people like Steve Hayes and Chris Anderson believe that the program must survive if towns like Presho are to prosper. Hayes knows well that sometimes it takes ideas from outside to jog a community into action, even if that action is aimed at simple self-preservation. He himself is proof that it takes only a few dedicated people to reverse a community's self-image: in the two years since he returned to the bank in Presho, several businesses have opened, or reopened, or rolled over to new management.

"Maybe what we're trying to do should be the role of the bank instead, or of other groups in the community," Anderson reflects, "and the school should simply assist. I haven't yet determined what our proper role is.

"The only thing I do know is this: We have to make young people believe they have something to offer us. If we don't start keeping young people in our communities, we're gonna die."

**CUSTER**

Half the state away from Presho, buried deep in the southern Black Hills, the tourist town of Custer sees itself as the best-kept secret in South Dakota. Custer's identity and its livelihood are immediately apparent: the profusion of motels, restaurants, and souvenir shops – absent in a town such as Belle Fourche, though the two are of roughly the same size – bears witness that Custer lives and dies with the tourist trade.

Once the dollars brought in by tourism were regarded as gravy by local businesses, but in recent years businesspeople have come to equate the health of the tourist economy with the continued health of their town, according to Mark Bruce, a

transplanted Minnesotan who runs the Wrangler restaurant. Certainly the mayor and the town council understand the importance of tourism to the local economy. About 60% of sales taxes for the year are collected in the three and a half months that mark the height of the tourist season.

Certainly, too, downtown Custer is doing pretty well; only one building, the old Harney Theatre, stands empty. And just up the road lie the magnificent new Crazy Horse monument and, beyond that, the archetypal American tourist spot, Mount Rushmore. Projections call for the area around Custer to grow from its current population of 5,000 (2,000 residents in town and 3,000 in the surrounding countryside) to 10,000 by 1995.

But is this good news or not? The locals aren't quire sure. The availability of water is a problem, everyone admits; no new motels can be built until new supplies of water are found and tapped. There's a covert recognition, too, that a tourist boom would change forever the nature of life in Custer.

"If you develop the Hills for tourism, you give up the way the Hills are right now," says Mark Bruce ruefully. "You can't develop tourism without affecting the environment, but we may have to do just that. I don't know what I believe. That's a tough choice to make."

Young people growing up in Custer face equally tough choices, choices that force many of them to leave town. Many of the boys who graduate from Custer High School, if they wish to stay in town, go into lumbering or mining; many girls go to work at Custer State Hospital. And of course there's always work available at the restaurants that line the main drag. But the restaurant jobs and the hospital jobs are characterized by low pay and high turnover. The Forest Service jobs pay better; the government owns some 75% of the land hereabouts, and the district office is located in Custer.

All in all, though, as Dave Versteeg says, "There's not a lot of future of young people in Custer. There are a lot of dead-end jobs here. You don't find many young people who have been able to work their way into business. For the most part, we're training kids to leave."

Where do the kids go when they leave Custer? In the class of '88, 27 of the 72 graduates – well over a third – went to college or universities, 18 in-state and nine out-of-state; 10 attended other post-high school institutions, such as secretarial or vocational school; 13 (all male) went into the military; 14 found some type of full-time employment and four settled for part-time jobs; four were either unemployed or unreachable. Most of the folks in Custer assume that few of those who go on to college will return home if they eventually graduate.

As in so many other small towns around the Midwest, many of the young people who leave but do not graduate form college do find themselves drawn back to Custer after a couple of years. "But then what do they do?" asks Versteeg. "They end up logging or mining or cooking in restaurants."

A large part of Custer's population is composed of transients, for reasons no one can explain exactly. The most popular explanation for the continual flow of mostly young families through the community is that they come to Custer and try working for a while, fail to make it, and move in. What this means for the local schools is that the elementary school is forever bursting at the seams, but that enrollments at the junior high and high school are relatively stable. In addition, the mix of transient younger families, who in some towns would grow attached to the town and its schools, and the large number of retirees who have moved to Custer undermines support for the work of the schools.

Juanita Fish, chief operating officer of the local bank, see the strain placed on Custer's infrastructure by the transient population. And she sees a need that has grown over time for a way of creating jobs in the community that can lead a young

person somewhere over the long haul. Finally, she sees a growing interest in her town in keeping young people here, where they grew up, and of drawing them into the life of the community.

That task is the work of Dave Versteeg. Versteeg, like Paul Dingeman in Belle Fourche, is a true believer in the larger goals of the Rural Schools and community Development Program. A native of East River (he graduated from Augustana College in Sioux Falls), he taught in the little town of Parker for six years before moving to Custer. Though it was the lure of life in the Black Hills that called him to move west, it's the promise of developing his students' participation in Blacks Hills business that puts a gleam in his eyes now.

Now Versteeg earns just under $20,000 per year for a day that includes teaching world history, government and world geography (in alternating semesters), and psychology and economics. He also serves as assistant football coach and as wrestling and track coach.

His fourth-period economics class is the home of the McREL project in Custer; it is here that Versteeg works to make his students aware how intimately their lives are tied to what they read in their text. "It's not just economics that I'm trying to teach here," he says almost impatiently, as he discusses the relevance of the project to every subject in the curriculum. "it's an economic way of thinking!

At first Versteeg had to sit down and ponder what he wished to do with his economics class and how he could build real-world goals into his students' thinking. "I felt like we were missing the boar with some basic economic concepts that every businessperson has to understand," he said. "We have to teach kids things they can use in their own community, things that will enable them to see a niche for themselves in the community."

So he designed a new kind of economics class for Custer High School, and he formed a club – the Future Entrepreneurs of America – which is only open to those who have taken his economics class or are currently enrolled in it.

The class is not only concerned with traditional economic curriculum, but spends part of its time studying entrepreneurship and doing at least one project that deals with community/economic development in Custer.

"You can build this philosophy into any kind of class, he continues excitedly. "I'd like to see other teachers buy into this and use parts of it in their classes. It would work in shop, or home economics – or any class at all, really. And get the elementary schools involved, too. Get in a situation where the older kids are teaching this to younger kids."

"I wish we could all get together and work more between departments," he says wistfully. "Right now we don't cooperate very much."

Shawn, one of the students in the fourth-period class, is applying for a FASTRACK loan that would allow him to open a driving range. (A student in Presho was able to start a driving range using FASTRACK funds.) And three more students have developed a business plan that centers on reopening the Harney Theatre. They hope that the owner will allow them to run the business, which might include plays, dinner theatre performances, and other community functions.

"The word 'fund raiser' ought to be banned," Versteeg says with some heat. "They ought to be called 'businesses' and operated as businesses instead. It's imply a way of thinking about it. It's just good business. And most people can become good businessmen."

Versteeg's idea of utopia is using the school as an incubator for new businesses, a la Johathan Sher and Eliot Wigginton. The businesses, which would be developed by students in the economic development program, would be spun out into the community and operated independently of the program as they became successful.

Graduating students might buy their way into these new enterprises, and the school would then move on to new projects, with new groups of students.

Or the school could act as a consulting firm, a research firm, which would be centered in the economics class year after year. As an example, Versteeg suggests the idea of performing research on summer tourism for the Chamber of Commerce or for nearby Custer State Park. (Linde Manlove, director of the local Chamber of Commerce for the past six years, might add the warning that two of every three new businesses fail within five years.)

Versteeg is keenly aware of the ephemeral nature of the rural economic development project as it is currently constituted, at least in the Custer schools. He'd like to create a program that could be passed along to his successor, should he decide to move on to another school. "It's easy to get this program going," he observes. "All you have to do is find one person who's fired up about it. But maybe you can't expect it to last when you leave. Maybe it's only temporary, unless you can involve more people in it. And build it into the curriculum. And get it okayed by the school board."

**CONCLUSION**

The final portion of this report, I plan to note some characteristics of the five schools and communities in South Dakota that are shared by other sites I visited during the past year and a half. My intent in drawing these comparisons is to show, first, that the dilemmas faced by South Dakota educators in attempting major reforms of the educative process are not unique.

First, the schools. The schools in the communities I visited confront many of the same problems being faced by schools in all of small-town and rural America, though to different degrees in the different towns. Here are some of the

characteristics that are not uncommon in any small, relatively isolated school district (some, indeed, are characteristic of school districts of any size).

o **Administrators with an overabundance of roles.** Overburdened principals and superintendents cannot act effectively as the instructional leader of their schools. (This notion of the need for instructional leadership is central to most of the current literature of education reform.) Administrators working under such conditions so not feel that they have the time to work with teachers to improve the quality of instruction; they see themselves as building managers rather than as instructional leaders. Now, my observations have shown that this state of affairs is, to some extent, a state of mind; there <u>are</u> administrators in just such schools who do work as instructional leaders. They are the exception, however.

o **Getting the most (and more) out of teachers in an effort to expand curricula offerings.** Teachers in small schools routinely teach five separate preparations each day, and teaching six preps is not an uncommon occurrence. Some administrators will say that they regard the extra class preparations as a fair trade-off for the fewer number of students with whom each teacher must meet. But teachers feel keenly (and consistently across schools and states) that they do not have enough time to devote to students' needs – both academic and personal. The tension created in teachers by their efforts to attend to all facets of students' lives is one of the most rending aspects of their professional existence. Asked what might improve the quality of their professional life, teachers most frequently wish for more time, in the form of smaller classes or fewer class preparations.

However, even in very small school districts, I observed an interesting phenomenon in connection with this desire for smaller classes. Most times, even the smallest classes (a social studies class of nine students, a psychology class of five students) are taught in exactly the same manner as are much larger classes in bigger schools. In my opinion, this instructional approach – the lecture-recitation

approach, which is the time-honored method of instruction in American public schools – negates all the possible advantages of smallness of scale. In part, this failure to try to fit new techniques of instruction to the unique circumstances of small, rural schools is the failure of the programs that prepared the teachers; in part, it is the failure of the principals to provide instructional leadership – and other portions of blame could likely be assigned to other spheres of influence. But it is important to note that these observations are widespread and pervasive.

o Related to several of the points above – particularly the overburdened life of administrators and the stress placed on over-committed teachers – is **the centrality of professional development to school improvement.** A creative and responsive program of professional development (also known as staff development, or inservice education) should be at the heart of any efforts to improve U.S. schools. Unfortunately, this area is one of the weakest points of the entire education enterprise. Over the last decade and a half, the literature of education has continued to address the topic and to emphasize its extreme importance, but – in small schools especially – it has been, and is, neglected woefully.

Consider the fact that some of the more forward-looking and creative American corporations insure that as much as 10% of their employees' time is spent in activities of professional renewal; compare that figure with the 1% (at most) of teachers' time that is devoted to professional renewal. The excuses for this dearth of opportunities for continuing education for educators are many and valid; at the head of the list is usually the expense of staff development, both in money and time. Professional development as it might be planned and conducted simply does not have much of a place in most of the schools I visited.

o Another very real, but invisible, problem that faces small and rural schools is **the enormous (and growing) gap between what schools are doing now and what they will need to be doing to meet the demands of what has come to be known as the**

**Information Age**. Don Lusch, county extension agent in Calhoun County, Michigan, put it well: "We're more concerned that the child knows how to find out what's new rather than simply being fed facts and information, because those facts are going to change." Instead, Lusch observes, "Our teachers are primarily information-givers, just like their teachers were in college. They do linear thinking. If a kid misses a math problem, they give him more math problems. They've gotten in a real rut."

The problem that Lusch describes is a painfully real one today. For example, despite all the attention to critical thinking in the education literature in recent years, I saw very little attention to critical thinking in the classrooms I visited. A large proportion of the classwork I saw was shaped by the content of standardized textbooks and their accompanying worksheets – what I have come to think of as "the worksheet blues." Even though the standardized tests that I examined provide many and varied exercises for classes to perform (including exercises that call for critical thinking), a great many teachers omit such exercises, asking only the fact-based, recall-oriented questions that appear in the Teacher Editions of the standardized tests. Asked why, these teachers say they feel hard-pressed to cover all the content that must be covered during a school year – content they know their students will be called to account for on standardized tests.

In classroom after classroom, I might add, I saw all the characteristics that astute observers have cataloged over the years: the excessive amount of time that students must spend waiting – whether waiting in line for lunch or to be dismissed, waiting to be called on in class, etc.; the creation of what Philip Jackson called "the denial of desire" ("the ultimate outcome of many of the delays occurring in the classroom"); the rigidity of the curriculum. I also observed a phenomenon that has not appeared so frequently in the literature but that Ralph Tyler had warned me to watch for – and this is crucial to the McREL project: the failure of student to take responsibility for their own learning. McREL's own description of the intent of the

Rural Schools and Community Development Program included this expectation, as a part of the fabric of the entire program: "That personal knowledge translates into the expectation that students are responsible learner." In classroom after classroom – in South Dakota and across the Midwest – I saw students content to allow teachers to do the lion's share of the work each day,even to the point of allowing teachers to be almost entirely responsible for regulating their (students') behavior. This phenomenon is not a failure simply of the schools, because it is not consistent across all classrooms; a single teacher can completely reverse this effect. It is, when it appears, a combined product of the home and the school – indeed, a product of every influence on young people today. The prevalence of this type of behavior places a serious obstacle in the path of the continued success of this program.

**THE COMMUNITIES**

Alluding to the influence of the home prompts me to move to a brief discussion of the status of the five communities I visited. A note here. Some of my observations in the first section of this report were of necessity limited by the inability, within the terms of my contract, to spend sufficient time in the schools I visited. The same caveat holds true of my attempts to gain a feel for the communities involved. I will mention each of the observations only briefly, without elaborating (though I would be glad to meet with staff members from McREL and from the Black Hills Co-op for a more detailed briefing):

- A pervasive sense of recognition or connectedness is an essential part of life in these little communities, and in their schools.

- The fate of the school and the town seem linked. Residents believe that the continued existence of the school is necessary to the continued viability of the community.

o Long-time residents observe marked change in children and in their families, as a result of changes in the structure of the home and the workplace.

o The need for leadership that would find solutions to the common dilemmas faced by small towns in pervasive, as is the resistance to leadership and to new ideas. Sometimes the best results may be obtained by local citizens who have grown up in the community, left for some time, and then returned to take a hand in the life of the town.

o Overwhelmingly common is the powerless feeling that the best and the brightest young people are leaving small-town and rural America. Educators are caught in the middle of this quality of attitude. On the one hand, this is one role of schools today, just as it is of parents: to prepare young people for life in the larger world outside the womb of family and community. This attitude is summed up poignantly by Ardis Harnish of Grand Marais, Michigan, in noting the sadness of graduation ceremonies each spring. "When you have graduation, you're really saying good-bye. And everybody cries."

On the other hand, schools tend not to deal too thoroughly either with preparations for life outside the community or for what the school might do to further the well-being of the community. Surely here is a place where the philosophy that is part of the marrow of the Rural Schools and Community Development Program can make a significant difference. In elaborating on his study of "Mansfield," Alan Peshkin said, in Growing Up American, (and this holds true for a great many small communities that could also profit from exposure to the McREL model):

> When asked what their school system should do for their community,beyond educating their children, Mansfielders reply with uncertainty. In effect, they do not conceive of [their school as] serving communal...needs; it serves, rather, to help individual children acquire "the basics" and develop competencies useful for employment or success in postsecondary institutions. They hold no expressed vision of the school as a community agent directed toward survival,

> notwithstanding the widely held belief that Mansfield's future is uncertain.
>
> No one – educator, parent, or village leader – associates their school with the tasks of developing talent useful to Mansfield's economy. Preposterous indeed, so it would be argued: few jobs are available and those few are held by unskilled women or members of the families that operate local businesses. Farm jobs also are scarce, the days of the farm laborer mostly a memory, and even sons of farmers cannot count on succeeding their fathers.
>
> Thus, if we seek consciously articulated connections between schooling and community survival, we cannot identify occupational ties. Nor, for that matter, can we identify political ties. In short, the community is not the focal point for study in school. The school's overt orientation is, on the one hand, individual and, on the other, translocal – clearly and significantly national more than state or regional. Moreover, aside from the school's valued contribution to Mansfield through its payroll and local purchases, and its effect on bringing parents to town – all contributions of consequence to Mansfield's survival – neither educators nor lay persons expect the school to teach content, develop skills, or promote an outlook that will improve Mansfield's chance for a viable future. (Emphasis added)

Let me make one additional allusion to the literature of the field of educational sociology, this one to The Small Rural Primary School, by Adrian Bell and Alan Sigsworth. Bell and Sigsworth discuss the advantages of small, rural schools and the role of a "locally relevant curriculum" (Paul Nachtigal has made this same valuable point, which bears directly on this project of rural economic development):

> ...[S]mall rural schools do have distinctive characteristics which can reasonably be thought of as potential advantages if we can escape from the assumption that the typically urban model represents the "one best system.". . .[S]o long as small schools serving rural populations are thought of as simply smaller versions of large urban schools, and are expected to function in the same way, they will continue to appear educationally deficient.

And this passage, which shows that there are indeed options for small, rural schools in their curricula approaches:

> A locally relevant curriculum in [students'] formal schooling is not simply a confirming experience for all that they already know, but an initiation into ways of reflecting and acting intelligently and imaginatively upon what they currently know and do. If it is not that, it is not likely to be any sort of education, only a selection ritual by which the more talented are encouraged and enabled to depart their community. The purpose of basing the curriculum substantially in the things and the people that pupils are familiar with, is not to persuade them to remain, when their schooling is over, within their community

> of origin, any more than it is to persuade them that the good life will be found elsewhere. It is to allow them to look critically and caringly at the particular world they inhabit and to develop the skills and the will to contribute to its development. Whether, in the end, they choose to stay or to leave that world is another matter which will in any case be dependent upon a great many other factors, but such an approach to their curriculum should not debar them from leaving. What it should do is to enable them to recognize that they have a choice, and thereby, to make an informed decision about whether to stay or to . What it should provide them with is an understanding of the nature of community, an understanding which they can put to use wherever they choose to spend the rest of their lives. (Emphasis added)

The common denominator – in both schools and communities (and this is true across mid-America) – is the power of the individual to bring about change. The obverse of this observation, however, is that, since the change depends on the personal power of a single person, it may not prove to be lasting change. In school after school, a single administrator can make an enormous difference in the instructional climate of a school. (Less frequently can a solitary teacher make such a marked difference, because of the isolation of teachers in their own classroom.) This single factor of educators' isolation from one another and from outside influence is the fulcrum on which the success or eventual failure of this entire project may rest.

Many rural residents have long subscribed to the potent myth that communities and their schools work closely together. In fact, most times they do not work together; most times they work in entirely separate spheres, coming together only for special ceremonial occasions. This separation must cease if schools and communities are to pull together for their common good – for the renewed life of the communities and for the revitalized learning opportunities and rekindled citizenship of young people in rural America.

The Rural Schools and Community Development Program has just such ambitious renewal as its aim – the recreation of small-town America through its most valuable resource: its young people. The obstacles that face the project are

formidable, growing as they do out of the deepest structure of schooling, which has remained untouched by generations of reform. The goals of the project, however, reach far beyond the schoolhouse walls to tap the diminished but still vital life force that lies at the heart of small-town America. In that vitality rests the success of the project, and the promise of the future.